

SPATIA WILDLIFE

Butterflies of the Balkans - Bulgaria, Macedonia and Greece

Saturday 29th June - Saturday 13th July 2013

Trip report by Dr. Mario Langourov

Tour leader: Dr. Mario Langourov¹

Tour participants: Mr. David Griffiths
Mr. Geoff Woodcock
Mr. Ian Hodgson
Mrs. Karen Bartlett
Mr. Bob Snellgrove
Mrs. Sandra Snellgrove

Bulgaria, 29th – 30th June, 1st and 9th – 13th July 2012

Macedonia, 2nd - 4th July

Greece, 5th – 8th July

Day 1 Saturday 29th June

Outbound from Sofia; en route to Rila Monastery via Struma Valley; near Stob Village.

Weather: sunny and warm, late afternoon rain, still (~26°C).

Midday I met Ian, Karen and Geoff at the airport (arriving with earlier flight) and as we had some time before the second flight arrival we had a little walk near a small pond close to the airport. Here we got an idea of the successful tour that lied ahead with the first Swallowtail, Scarce Swallowtail, Large Skipper and Comma. Then we met the rest of the participants - Bob, Sandra and David and headed on Struma Highway to our first hotel, situated not faraway from Rila Monastery. Once we turned off the main road we decided to make our first stop, near the village of Stob, famous for its sandy "pyramids". This turned out to be one of the few places where we found the Short-tailed Blue and Provençal Short-tailed Blue, and along with them Great Banded Grayling and Marbled White and others. Unfortunately it started to rain and we had no choice but heading to the hotel.

¹ All photos in this report were taken during the holiday by ©Mario Langourov

Day 2 Sunday 30th June

Kresna Gorge.

Weather: cloudy and windy (~20°C).

Already at breakfast, it became clear that we will have to abandon our plan to visit the mountain meadows due to heavy clouds and constant rain over this part of the mountain. In such a weather the only solution is to visit Kresna Gorge - and indeed there was mostly sunny and slightly windy, but no rain. Here we were greeted by clouds of Spoonwing Lacewing (*Nemoptera sinuata*) (Pic. 2), Balkan Marbled White and Great Banded graylings. Along with them we also found Sooty Copper, Wall Brown, Southern White Admiral, Lattice Brown and Eastern Bath White. After a while on one of the trees completely defoliated in the spring I found a single Nettle-Tree Butterfly. We enjoyed a nice lunch under the shadows of century old Oriental Plane trees, above the foaming Struma River (Pic. 1). In the afternoon we went down to the river and came upon the first Krueper's Small White (Pic. 3), Oberthür's Grizzled and Mallow Skippers, Common Glider and Long-tailed Blue. We devoted a considerable attention to one of the smallest "jewels" - Little Tiger Blue. Before we went back to the hotel we visited Rila Monastery, declared by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Day 3 Monday 1st July

Rila Mt: Iliyna River Valley; Kirilova Polyana; Sharkov Anduk.

Weather: cold and misty morning (~7°C), then sunny and warm (21°C).

Our first goal for the day was Kirilova Meadow, the weather being far away from perfect for butterflies watching, but still in the rare brighter intervals we managed to find Black-veined White, Queen of Spain Fritillary and Mazarine Blue. Eventually we found our target species here - Balkan Copper and Clouded Apollo. We headed to the valley of Iliyna River – a place where almost always can be seen the attractive Purple Emperor and Poplar Admiral. On the surrounding meadows we saw Green Hairstreak, Large Wall Brown, Small Pearl-bordered and Niobe fritillaries and Scarce Copper. After some time, the long waited shout was given - "Poplar Admiral", which, as usual, periodically landed on the dirt road (Pic. 4). After finishing the photo shooting we had a light lunch and headed to a small valley on the way. We were met by abundance of Purple-shot Copper, and on the moist sand were perched dozens Zephyr Blue (Pic. 5). We managed to photograph also Meleager's and Chequered Blues, Sloe and Ilex Hairstreaks, Pearly Heath, Lulworth Skipper, and the most pleasant surprise came in the face of the photogenic Persian Skipper. Yet we were about to have relatively long transfer to Prilep town, so we had to be on the road and after seamlessly crossing the border in the late afternoon we stopped for a short break near Kocani, after which we have reached the hotel.

Day 4 Tuesday 2nd July

Macedonia – Pletvar; Raec Gorge.

Weather: sunny and warm to very hot, dry, still (24°C-37°C).

First we decided to visit the slopes of Babuna Mountain and here we were met by many graylings, amongst which were Eastern Rock and Balkan Grayling, and also a numerous Great Sooty Satyr. Among the surrounding vegetation and the blossoms we saw also Osiris, Turquoise and Adonis blues, Weaver's and Twin-spot fritillaries. A bit later we saw our first of many Macedonian graylings (Pic. 6), along with it were flying Eastern Greenish Black-tip and Berger's Clouded Yellow. Once we were satisfied, we turned our attention to the blades of Cross-leaved Gentian (*Gentiana cruciata*), on which we found the eggs of Alcon Blue, plus Mountain Small White, Blue-spot and Purple Hairstreaks, Oriental Marbled Skipper. Above our heads flew Camberwell Beauty which entrained David in pursuit, in which he became the fastest man on the planet, while for the rest there was a Large Tortoiseshell posing well. On elder flowers were found Grecian and Ripart's Anomalous blues. Part of the group stayed around little pond to take pictures of Emerald and Southern Emerald damselflies, and when we were

already by to the vehicle a Eastern Greenish Black-tip flew and landed on the ground next to us (Pic. 7)! It was extremely cooperative and allowed us a serie of excellent photos. After lunch we headed to the area with mostly Mediterranean vegetation near Kavadtartzi. There we found Lesser Fiery Copper, Escher's Blue, White-banded Grayling, Hermit, Oriental Meadow Brown, Balkan Green-veined White, and in the forest next to the river - Lattice Brown, Speckled Wood. Around the puddles on the road were Sandy Grizzled Skipper, Long-tailed Blue and the only one for the tour, but very photogenic Iolas Blue (Pic. 8).

Day 5 Wednesday 3rd July

Macedonia – Pelister Mt; Galichitsa Mt.

Weather: sunny and warm/ hot, dry, still (27°C).

We headed further west to Prespa Lake, and after Bitolya we stopped on the blossoming meadows in the northern foothills of Pelister Mountain. Here on the flowers were nectaring different fritillaries (Twin-spot, Marbled, Silver-washed, Dark Green, Heath), Ringlet, Pearly Heath, White Admiral and Scarce Copper. After light lunch in the hotel, situated at the edge of Prespa lake we drove up on Galichitsa Mountain and the Mediterranean landscape was replaced with a mountain one. Among others here we can highlight Brimstone, Silver-studded Blue, Reverdin's Blue, Glanville Fritillary, Russian Heath (Pic. 9) and Large Grizzled Skipper. Above the meadows were flying Esper's Marbled White (Pic. 10), Bright-eyed Ringlet and Small Tortoiseshell. We found time to admire the lovely panoramic view open from here to the lake. After we enjoyed the scenery and tranquility in the area we found a Clouded Apollo, Spotted and Lesser Spotted fritillaries.

Day 6 Thursday 4th July

Macedonia – Galichitsa Mt.

Weather: till midday - sunny and warm, dry, still (~24°C); in the afternoon – cloudy and cool (~16°C).

After breakfast we went up again to Galichitsa and devoted our day to careful studying the different zones of the mountain. The meadows were full of life and amongst the others we have to mention the unbelievable numbers of Geranium Argus (Pic. 11), concentrated on just 20 square meters. In the neighbourhood some canine excrement was as a magnit for numerous fritillaries - Freyer's Fritillary (Pic. 12), Knapweed, Heath and False Heath Fritillary and blues - Silver-studded, Reverdin's, Mazarine, Eros (Pic. 13) and Mountain Argus. Among the grass and bushes we observed Eastern Knapweed Fritillary and Clouded Apollo. The beautiful area provided us with great conditions for picnic lunch, after which the weather dramatically changed - the sky is covered with storm clouds and the temperature dropped drastically. The afternoon we spent in the high zone of the mountain and in the company of Russian Heath, Glanville Fritillary, Yellow-banded Skipper and Esper's Marbled White. After a while I found Marsh Fritillary, which was extremelly well-disposed and allowed everyone to make the necessary shots (Pic. 14). It was time to return to the hotel and after dinner to take a well-deserved rest.

Day 7 Friday 5th July

Greece – Verno Mt.

Weather: sunny and warm to hot, still (~30°C).

Today we headed through South Macedonia toward Greece. Fast transfer on the highway and after a check-in in the hotel we used the time to visit high zone of Verno Mt. For lunch we stoped at a quiet summer roadside restaurant where we enjoyed a tasty food and fast service by the owner. Right after we got out of it we saw Greek Clouded Yellow – a true highlight, and the walk provided Clouded Apollo, Chapman's and Amanda's Blues, Blue-spot Hairstreak, Arran Brown; also numerous Coppers – Balkan (Pic. 15), Scarce, Sooty and Purple-shot; fritillaries - Silver-washed, High Brown, Niobe, Queen of Spain, Marbled and Pearl-bordered. Around Aliakmonas River we found Anomalous Blue and Ripart's Anomalous Blue and Balkan Grayling.

Day 8 Saturday 6th July

Greece – Kerkini Lake & Belasitsa (Kerkini) Mt.

Weather: cloudy and rainy morning (~16°C), than sunny and very hot, still (32°C).

We hit the road again – our next goal is Kerkini Lake and the surrounding mountains. Almost during the whole traveling it was raining and pretty cool, so the stops that we planned didn't bring us anything special. We reached the west edge of the lake and we stopped nearby the many spills which hold a number of feeding birds - Purple Herons, Spoonbills, Glossy Ibis, Crested Grebes, Dalmatian and White Pelicans, different gulls and terns. Under a century old plane-trees we ate and had a short walk and some managed to see again Nettle-Tree Butterfly. After that we headed again to the coasts of the lake and we met numerous Large Copper, Short-tailed Blue, Lang's Short-tailed Blue, Long-tailed Blue (Pic 16), Mallow Skipper and others. We devoted some attention also to the dragonflies - Small Pincetail, Balkan Goldenring, Southern, White-tailed and Black-tailed skimmers and Red-veined Darter. In the late afternoon we went back to the hotel, picturesque situated over the town of Sidirokastro.

Day 9 Sunday 7th July

Greece – above Sidirokastro; Menikio Mt; Bozdag (Falakro) Mt.

Weather: sunny and hot, still (31°C); cloudy and cool late afternoon (18°C).

Before heading to Phalakron Mountain we have checked the valey north of the town, nested between Alibotoush and Vronuous mountains. Here we found few Freyer's graylings (Pic. 17) and Sandy Grizzled skipper, while the flowery bushes near a spring provided Meleager's Blue, Anomalous Blue and the Hermit (Фиг. 18), Osiris Blue, Holly Blue, Large and Oberthür's Grizzled Skippers and the rare Persian Skipper. Our picnic lunch was again under the thick shade of a huge plane tree, near the spring. Afterwards we headed to Phalakron Mountain with its peak Bozdag. Its high zone greeted us with the first Apollos and Eastern Large Heath plus Silver-studded Blue, Queen of Spain Fritillary and Small Tortoiseshell. It is time to go to the hotel where the owners – Kosta and Ana, already a good friends of ours, welcomed us very warm and have prepared a rich dinner of traditional dishes.

Day 10 Monday 8th July

Greece – Bozdag (Falakro) Mt.

Weather: cloudy with sunny spells untill midday (16°C-18°C), than rain in the mountain; sunny and warm (30°C).

As in the previous years, Kosta has offered to join us for the day, and we have of course accepted it. As usual we started from the top of the mountain (at around 2000 m asl.) as even in the height of the summer the weather often changes in the afternoon. Here we found again Apollo, Clouded Apollo, Eastern Large Heath (pic. 19) and many Painted ladies. Meadows here are covered with the Balkan endemic *Sideritis scardica*, used widely as a medicine plant. While descending, at the roadside rocks, Ian managed to spot Black Ringlet! After being not so cooperative in the beginning we finally managed to see it well and photograph it. A tiny mountain valley provided the local specialty – the endemic Phalakron Blue, alongside with Safflower and Marbled skippers. After the picnic lunch we have explored the surroundings which provided another rarity – the Higgins's Anomalous Blue, plus Dusky Meadow Brown, Wall and Large Wall browns. The sky was getting darker with rainy clouds so we descended further lower down and the meadows here were timing with life – we have recorded few fritillaries - Silver-washed, Knapweed, Marbled and Twin-spot, plus hairstreaks – White-letter and Sloe, while the bushes around revealed Gatekeeper and Meadow Brown. Most unexpected and welcomed was unusually late Eastern Festoon – a great end of the day.

Day 11 Tuesday 9th July

Bulgaria – South Pirin Mt; Papaztchair Pass; near Dobrinishte.

Weather: in the morning - sunny and warm; still (28°C); cloudy and rainy, T-storm (17°C).

We crossed the Greek-Bulgarian border and not long after we found ourselves at the southern foothills of the Pirin Mountain in Bulgaria. Here we observed clouds of butterflies mud puddling from the roadside puddles or nectaring from the flowers, including Swallowtail, Woodland and Balkan Graylings, Weaver's Fritillary, Map Butterfly and Dingy Skipper. Among the surrounding vegetation we found Large Blue, Scarce and Purple-shot coppers (Pic. 20). We ate at a roadside gazebo and headed to Papazchair Pass. We headed to the high area where to look for the rare Bosnian Blue, but at the foot of the peak stormy clouds gathered over us, the first drops of rain fell not long after, accompanied by strong thunders ... Under persistent rain we headed north to our next hotel, located in the picturesque village of Dobarsko.

Day 12 Wednesday 10th July

Pirin Mt – Chalin Valog; above Dobrinishte; near Dobarsko.

Weather: sunny and warm; still (~25°C); cloudy with rain at midday (16°C).

Today we planned to ascend to about 2000 meters a.s.l. – our first goal was the hut Vihren. However, due to the rainy weather conditions we were forced again to change our plans and we went down amongst the wet meadows in the area of Chalin valog valley. It was warm and sunny here, which allowed us to find Balkan Copper, Escher's Blue (Pic. 21), Amanda's Blue, Meleager's Blue, Turquoise Blue, Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary and Dusky Meadow Brown. But undisputedly the most of our attention was drawn to Alcon Blue (Pic. 22), egg-laying on the tips of *Gentiana cruciata*. We transferred over Dobrinishte and in the short interval before the rain we manage to find long desired by some of the participants Black Hairstreak, and also Idas Blue. The rain chased us away for lunch at the hotel and after that we visited the unique church in Dobarsko - branch of the National History Museum. Because of the long lasting rain we retreated at the hotel, but in the late afternoon when the sky was clear again, almost everyone used the chance for a short walk in the surroundings.

Day 13 Thursday 11th July

Rila Mt – Yundola; Yadenitsa Gorge; near Sestrimo.

Weather: sunny and warm to hot (16°C÷30°C).

Our plans to visit Belmeken peak failed again because of the bad weather in the highest parts of the mountain and we were forced to stop not faraway of the Yundola pass where we found Arran Brown, Large Ringlet, Niobe Fritillary, Balkan and Purple-shot Coppers. But here it also started raining and we continued on the road and we stopped for picnic lunch in Yadenitsa Gorge. Close to the river we found Lesser Fiery Copper, Cardinal and Oriental Marbled Skipper. In the early afternoon we stopped next to the blossoming Buddlea bushes, not faraway from Sestrimo village. Here we found Common Glider, Orbed Red Underwing (Hungarian) Skipper and Dingy Skipper. A bit later we found Large and Chequered blues (Pic. 23), but the main attraction were some fresh Dryads (Pic. 24). In the late afternoon we reached the hotel, nestled in the northern foothills of Rila Mountains, in the small village of Govedartsi.

Day 14 Friday 12th July

Rila Mt; meadows near Govedartsi.

Weather: in the morning - cold and misty, rain (11°C), than cloudy and cool (~16°C).

The cabin lift took us to the high zone of Rila. Within half an hour we passed above 1000 m elevation – from 1300 meters to over 2300 meters! A great opportunity to enjoy the splendor of Rila Mountain and its nature.

Our main goal here is Cynthia's Fritillary, but the clouds didn't step back a single piece of the sky, a fog fell and at the end it started to rain... There were no prospects for improvement and we went down again in the vicinity of Samokov. The weather here was bad as well, so that we saw only 10-ish species, among them were Large Wall Brown, Mazarine Blue, Painted Lady, Small Pearl-bordered and Niobe Fritillary, Ringlet, Large Blue (Pic. 25), Dusky Meadow Brown. In the late afternoon we went back to the hotel and we found time to download and put in order some of our pictures.

Day 15 Saturday 13th July

Iskar Valley - Vedená.

Weather: sunny and warm, still (20°C).

We headed to Sofia, as Ian, Karen and Geoff has earlier flight. After we dropped them at the airport we have returned with Bob, Sandra and David in the valley of Iskar River where we found Lattice Brown, Scarce Swallowtail (Pic. 26), Dark Green Fritillary, Map Butterfly, Speckled Wood, Peacock, Red Admiral and Great Banded Grayling. And it was like for wishing goodbye and like an invitation for new meetings, but five or six Lesser Purple Emperors (Pic. 27) landed next to the road and allowed a series of excellent photos.

In total - two weeks spent in the most interesting and picturesque places in the Balkans and a new record for a butterfly tour - a 154 species of butterflies recorded, despite the few rainy days.



Pic.1. The group in Kresna Gorge. Left to right: Mario, Bob, David, Ian, Karen, Sandra, Geoff



Pic.2. Spoonwing Lacewing (*Nemoptera sinuata*)



Pic.3. Krueper's Small White (*Pieris krueperi*)



Pic.4. Poplar Admiral (*Limenitis populi*)



Pic.5. Zephyr Blue (*Plebejus sephirus*)



Pic.6. Macedonian Grayling (*Pseudochazara cingovskii*)



Pic.7. Eastern Greenish Black-tip (*Euchloe penia*)



Pic.8. Iolas Blue (*Iolana iolas*)



Pic.9. Russian Heath (*Coenonympha leander*)



Pic.10. Esper's Marbled White (*Melanargia russiae*)



Pic.11. Geranium Argus (*Aricia eumedon*)



Pic.12. Freyer's Fritillary (*Melitaea arduinna*)



Pic.13. Eros Blue (*Polyommatus eros eroides*)



Pic.14. Marsh Fritillary (*Euphydryas aurinia*)



Pic.15. Balkan Copper (*Lycaena candens*)



Pic.16. Long-tailed Blue (*Lampides boeticus*)



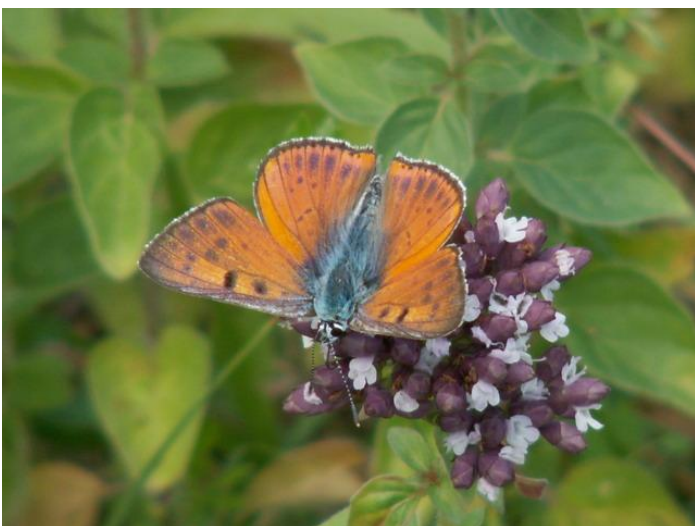
Pic.17. Freyer's Graylings (*Neohipparchia fatua*)



Pic.18. Hermit (*Chazara briseis*)



Pic.19. Eastern Large Heath (*Coenonympha rhodopenensis*)



Pic.20. Purple-shot Copper (*Lycaena alciphron*)



Pic.21. Escher's Blue (*Polyommatus escheri*)



Pic.22. Alcon Blue (*Maculinea alcon rebeli*)



Pic.23. Chequered Blue (*Scolitantides orion*)



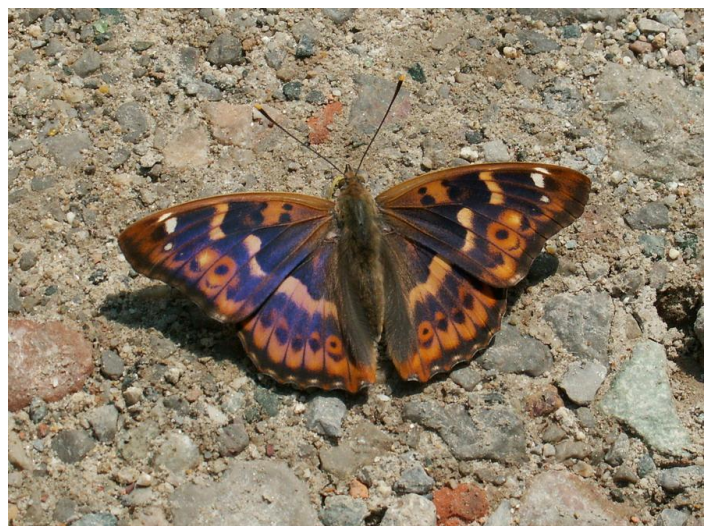
Pic.24. Dryad (*Minois dryas*)



Pic.25. Large Blue (*Phengaris arion*)



Pic.26. Scarce Swallowtails (*Iphiclides podalirius*)



Pic.27. Lesser Purple Emperor (*Apatura ilia*)